

A Stranger In Tennessee

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A few months before I was born, my Dad met a stranger who was new to our small Tennessee town. From the beginning, Dad was fascinated with this enchanted newcomer, and soon invited him to live with our family.

The stranger was quickly accepted and was around to welcome me into the world a few months later. As I grew up I never questioned his place in our family. In my young mind, each member had a special niche. My brother, Bill, five years my senior, was my example. Fran, my younger sister, gave me an opportunity to play big brother and develop the art of teasing. My parents were complementary instructors – Mum taught me to love the Word of God, and Dad taught me to obey it.

But the stranger was our storyteller. He could weave the most fascinating tales. Adventures, mysteries, and comedies were daily conversations. He could hold our whole family spellbound for hours each evening. If I wanted to know about politics, history, or science, he knew it all. He knew about the past, understood the present, and seemingly could predict the future. The pictures he could draw were so lifelike that I would often laugh or cry. He was like a friend to the whole family.

He took Dad, my brother and me to our first major league baseball game. He was always encouraging us to see the movies and he even made arrangements to introduce us to several movie stars. My brother and I were deeply impressed by John Wayne in particular.

The stranger was an incessant talker. Dad didn't seem to mind, but sometimes Mum would quietly get up while the rest of us were enthralled with one of his stories of faraway places, go to her room ... and pray. I wonder now if she ever prayed that the stranger would leave.

You see, my Dad ruled our household with certain moral convictions. But this stranger never felt an obligation to honour them. Profanity, for example, was not allowed in our house – not from us, from our friends, or adults. Our long time visitor, however, used occasional four-letter words that burned my ears and made Dad squirm. To my knowledge the stranger was never confronted.

My dad was a teetotaler who didn't permit alcohol in his home ... But the stranger felt like we needed exposure and enlightened us to other ways of life. He offered us beer and other alcoholic beverages often. He made cigarettes look tasty, cigars manly, and pipes distinguished.

He talked freely (probably too much too freely) about sex. His comments were sometimes blatant, sometimes suggestive, and generally embarrassing. I know now that my early concepts of the man-woman relationship were influenced by the stranger.

As I look back, I believe it was the grace of God that the stranger did not influence us more. Time after time he opposed the values of my parents. Yet he was seldom rebuked and never asked to leave.

More than 30 years have passed since the stranger moved in with the young family on Morningside Drive. He is not nearly so intriguing to my Dad as he was in those early years.

But, if you were to walk into my parents den today, you would still see him sitting over in a corner, waiting for someone to listen to him talk and look at his pictures. His name?

We always just called him TV.

[Television should be treated as a stranger, yet most families are treating it as a close friend. They spent lots of time in front of the tube and some of them even use it as a babysitter. Doing this has dangerous consequences on children's behaviour. The consequences might be related to various issues, such as violence, use of obscene language, promiscuity, racism, and lack of respect for authority.]